

Vietnamese Community Portrait

Trinh, Tu Vuong
Department of Sociology
University of the Pacific

“Vietnamese culture is very complex, in part due to participation of many groups in Vietnamese history.”

Viet Nam is located in Southeast Asia between China and Cambodia bordering three bodies of water; the Gulf of Thailand, Gulf of Tonkin, and the South China Sea. Viet Nam's population as of 1999 was over 77 million. There are over 52 ethnic minorities living in Viet Nam but the vast majority of the people are the Viet.¹ Anthropologically, the exact origin of the Vietnamese people is not known, but socially, the Viet believe their origin lies in the union of the dragon and a Chinese immortal. The dragon myth reveals a lot about the little known history of the Viet people. According to the legend, the first Vietnamese descended from the marriage of a dragon and an angel. Lac Long Quan's (Dragon Lord or Lord of the Lac) marriage to a Chinese immortal, Au Co, produced one hundred eggs. When the eggs hatched, fifty of the children accompanied their mother, Au Co to the mountains, and the remaining fifty accompanied their father, Lac Long Quan to the lowlands. Vietnamese people believe that those who followed Au Co to the mountains are the current minority inhabitants of Vietnam such as the Muong and the Chams, and those who inhabit the lowlands are the Viet.² This legend and other related legends, most of which received their literary form after AD 1200, describe in mythical terms the fusion, conflicts, and separation of peoples from the far north and south and of the people from the mountains and the coastal lowlands.³ According to anthropologists, there is little known about the origin of the Vietnamese except that they were referred to as the Lac People, with a history dating back to 2000 years ago. They originally lived around the Red River Delta, in what is now known as northern Vietnam. Some speculate that the Lac peoples were the result of a mixture between Australo-Melanesian inhabitants who have lived in the area since Paleolithic times and Asiatic peoples who later migrated into the area from China.

Foreign Influences

A rebellious Chinese general established Nam Viet, the original name of the country in 208 B.C. It was not until 111 B.C. that Chinese troops invaded the kingdom of Nam Viet and dominated for nine centuries. Chinese domination was not without challenge; there were many revolts against the Chinese. Although Vietnam's geographical area was minuscule in comparison to China's they were able to defeat Chinese troops in 938 A.D. to regain their independence. During this era of independence, the name of the country was changed to Dai Viet, then finally to Viet Nam, and the country expanded further south. Remnants of the Chinese culture exist in the social and cultural organization of contemporary Vietnamese families. Two important influences that remain in Vietnamese culture stem from the adoption of Confucian ideology and the influences of Buddhism as the dominant religion. Viet Nam's independence lasted for nine centuries before the onslaught of French colonialism. France's interest in Viet Nam's raw materials also led to two significant changes in Vietnamese culture. French missionaries adapted the Vietnamese language to the Roman alphabet to create a writing style called *quoc hgu*. Another influence was the introduction to Christianity.

Three Waves of Refugees

The First Wave - During the postcolonial days, Viet Nam's political, social, and economic situations endured much hardship that would infinitely influence their attitudes in the United States. Viet Cong or the Vietnamese Communists defeated the United States, and the South Vietnamese Army during the Viet Nam war. The defeat led to the influx of immigrants or boat people trying to escape their oppressive state. Through the years of outside domination, the most threatening and chaotic period was the period of take over by the communists. Many saw their lives threatened as the communist forces advanced towards Saigon (now known as Ho Chi Minh City). In 1975, 130,000 Vietnamese fled to the United States with the collapse of the independent regime. The first waves of refugees were Vietnamese people who worked with the U.S. government and sympathized with the South Vietnamese government. Most of those who fled were young, well-educated, English-speaking urban dwellers, mostly being Catholic.⁴ With the assistance of the U.S. military, they were placed in relocation camps rather than internment camps. This first group did not face as much hardship as the later refugees in terms of assimilation to the new way of life.

The Second Wave - The second and largest wave of refugees happened from 1979-1985. This group was more diverse, consisting of people from different social, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds. As a group, these people were less educated, less literate (in Vietnamese and English), less familiar with western ways of thought, and more rural than those in the first wave. Most were farmers in Viet Nam, but there were urbanites also. This second wave of refugees were not bilingual like the first wave, and have experienced more difficulty assimilating. Their escape was a long perilous ordeal, taking many months of planning. They sold every piece of property they owned to contribute to the escape, and if the escape were botched then they would be left destitute at the mercy of whoever might catch them. Most of the escape took place during the middle of the night, and something as simple as a coughing child would pose a great threat to the whole operation. Situations such as these forced many to face heart-wrenching decisions that would indefinitely influence their new lifestyle. Escaping capture by Viet Cong was only the beginning of other horrible and oftentimes tragic ordeals. Half of those who escaped died at sea because of pirate attacks, hunger, or disease. Those who made it to the neighboring lands of Indonesia, Philippines, and Hong Kong suffered more abuses at the hands of the guards at the internment camps. The fortunate ones would only spend a couple of months at these camps in deplorable conditions living in dilapidated buildings. For others, it would be years before they were able to make contact with any family members. The immediate threat of the communists was over, but their assimilation had only begun.

The Third Wave - The last wave of refugees arrived from 1985-1991. These people were brought to the United States through family unification programs. Leaving Viet Nam became increasingly difficult and those who escaped were returned to their country after neighboring countries refused asylum. Many saw going back to Viet Nam not as an option, but an end, some committing suicide rather than going back to the communist regime. These people are no longer *boat people*, but have become the beneficiaries of the refugees before them. They come to the U.S. with fewer hazards than those before them, but the years of communism took its toll on their psyche. Most do not have to start over completely because the previous groups have set precedents for them to follow, and they usually have some type of aid from family and friends.

Family Structure

Filial Piety - In Vietnamese society respect is the predominant sentiment in the relation between

members of a social group. Respect and consideration for old age no doubt derive from the obligation of filial piety, which requires young people to respect and love their parents and older members of society.⁵ People are regarded and greeted as members of a kinship group such as aunt, uncle, sister, or brother even if they are not of blood relation. It is also based on a hierarchical structure revolving around seniority and gender, where older people have higher status because they possess more knowledge about life. In Viet Nam, elders had high status and were viewed as a valuable source of knowledge, but after the flight to the U.S., there seems to be a role reversal where the status of the elders is not as important because of their lack of the English language and their unfamiliarity with American culture. This filial piety is also a source of conflict for the younger generations because they are growing up with the American ideology where the concept of youth is more important than age. Their parents were raised with the custom of seeing age as an asset in contrast to the American ideology where age may be a liability. Younger generations growing up in the U.S. do not fully comprehend why they must show respect towards their elders. They understand the surface idea that this is something they must do, but also use the ideology to reject the culture and rebel against it.

Collectivism vs. Individualism - The family is the most important unit in the Vietnamese society, with the emphasis on collectivism rather than individualism. At a very early age, children are taught to put the family's needs before their own. The concept of filial piety shapes the structure of the family. The family consists of the nuclear family unit along with the extended family of grandparents, aunts, and uncles. Elders live with the family and are taken care of until they pass away. The family is at the center of the society and each individual strives towards bringing esteem to the family name. Despite the concern for a certain amount of individuality, the Vietnamese person is not an individualist. Anything a Vietnamese does, he or she usually does it out of family considerations. Therefore, when a person has done a good deed, the family is praised and feels pride along with the individual, but the same concept applies to the opposite end of the spectrum. When an individual commits an offense, the individual has not only brought shame upon himself, but shame on the family name. The family also incurs the embarrassment from the offense because of the individual.

Dealing With Conflicts - As mentioned above, the family unit is an important aspect of one's life.

When conflicts occur within the family, it is more easily dealt with because the elders are consulted and a resolution is usually found. However, when a conflict occurs outside of the family, for instance a run-in with the law, it is taken out of the family context and they have difficulty handling the situation. No longer are the elders involved, but a stranger is dictating the situation. Vietnamese are not used to the idea of making decisions without consulting the family. Therefore, the individual may need some time to confer with family members before they make a decision.

Gangs - Another threat in the Vietnamese community is the presence of gangs. Gangs target the family as a whole because they understand the importance placed on family. They know that if an individual feels threatened, the family will also be threatened, and they are helpless. Their means of force is home invasions because they know that they can avoid capture and the payoff is good. Victims feel helpless because they feel that the police do not care to handle the case because they are not white. Gangs are aware of the attitudes of the victims and law enforcement, and they use it to their advantage. Victims feel that the system is not on their side and they have to fend for themselves.

Jail and the Court System - The idea of going to jail frightens many older Vietnamese because they connect the concept to the communists in Viet Nam. In Viet Nam, if a person went to jail, they were at the mercy of the corrupt government. Conflicts were mostly dealt with by a mediator, not officials of the law. The concept of jail also reminds them of internment and labor camps where if they lived to the next day they would be considered fortunate. Another reason for avoiding the court system is the perception of being foreigners. They believe that people are going to use that as a criterion to judge them unfairly. They are aware that their unfamiliarity with the system leaves them at a disadvantage and it would be best to avoid the system if possible. However, if they are forced to deal with the system, they may often attempt to speed up the process as much as possible by not testifying or by pleading guilty. They will often be reluctant to assist the court system because they feel that the system is unfair. [Perhaps they needed help in an instance of home invasion, and they did not receive the help.] Therefore, they feel no obligation to the principle of reciprocity.

Ideologies

Education - Despite China's failed attempt to Sinicize Vietnamese culture, the Confucian ideology

remains the most dominant structure in contemporary Vietnamese culture and society. Many customs are rooted in the Confucian respect for education, family, and elders, and the Taoist desire to avoid conflict.⁶ The Confucian ideology is based on the notion of self-cultivation through education and the importance of filial piety. This ideology emphasizes the importance of education as a self-cultivation tool and believes society can only properly function if it is run by those who are educated. Many refugees from the rural countryside believed in this ideal, but did not have the opportunity to attend school. They arrived in the United States with the hope their children would utilize the opportunities they were deprived of. Many younger Vietnamese children grow up in families where this idea is highly emphasized and they strive to do well in school. However, this idea also conflicts with the younger generation because they do not understand the time and era their parents come from. They do not understand why education is important to their parents, and sometimes resent the fact that they are pressured to pursue high status professional fields.

Buddhism - Introduced by the Chinese in 10th century A.D., Buddhism is the dominant religion of the Vietnamese. Using the Confucian code of respect and self-cultivation, Buddhism's essence lays in "The Four Noble Truths." They are, briefly: Unhappiness and suffering exist everywhere, Suffering is caused by desire, One may avoid suffering by transcending desire, and to do this, One must follow a prescribed moral path.⁷

Catholicism - Portuguese, Spanish, and French missionaries introduced Catholicism in the late sixteenth century. The basic principles of Catholicism are to live life according to the teachings of God. The combination of Confucian and Catholic ideologies further reinforces the family and social structure of the Vietnamese.

Verbal Communication

The use of the word "Yes" - In America, people put emphasis on friendliness in interpersonal relationships while in Vietnamese society the emphasis is more on respect. The same respect for family applies to those in society. People are greeted as Mr. or Mrs. and persons are referred to with kin association. Status and respect is very important in the Vietnamese culture and it is reflected in their way of communication. American people use only one word—the word yes—to express

agreement and this word does not reflect any attitude of respect or disrespect.⁸ However, in the Vietnamese culture, the use of the word yes is more complex, and they must choose between several different terms to express an agreement or an understanding of the situation. The word yes accompanied by a nod does not necessarily mean the person agrees or understands the situation. The purpose of the response is not to evoke any more problems, but it is an attempt to redress the situation. The different ways of answering yes is also based on who the speaker is talking to, and the use of you and I is considered disrespectful especially when one is speaking to an authority figure. Those who are new to the country are not familiar with the American concept that yes means they agree and understand the situation. They are used to their system of response based on seniority and status.

Non-Verbal Communication

Avoiding Eye Contact - Respect is also displayed through non-verbal communication such as body language either by bowing one's head, keeping quiet, or a faint smile. To show respect, Vietnamese will bow their heads to a superior or elder. When talking, one should not look steadily at a respected person's eyes. Not looking at a person in the eyes signifies that the person understands they are of lower status, and/or they do not want a confrontation.

Smiling - Smiling in the American culture is perceived as a sign of contentment or a sign of mischievousness. However, smiling in the Vietnamese culture is another non-verbal symbol for the display of respect. It is used as an expression of apology for a minor offense or an expression of embarrassment when one commits an innocent blunder. It is also used as a sign of gratitude since the Vietnamese rarely express their gratitude in words. A smile may seem appropriate for certain situations in the American culture, but in the Vietnamese culture, it is a symbol of remorse, or gratitude depending on the situation.

Not Responding Back - The younger generations of Vietnamese display respect mostly through bowing their heads to avoid eye contact, and avoid answering questions to avoid any further confrontation. When one has committed an offense, they are expected to stand quietly and listen to what the authority figure has to say. Responding back even if it is to defend oneself would be

extremely disrespectful. Responding back might anger the authority figure further and the authority figure might perceive it as a challenge to their authority. Responding back is adding insult to the injury. The only response one would be expected to say is yes, or *da*, which encompasses the recognition of fault along with offer of an apology. One does not engage in lengthy explanations to explain why an offense was committed, but recognizes that they are at fault and the least that can be done is to show respect to those they have offended. This behavior may seem strange when displayed outside of the culture, but it should not be mistaken for indifference or lack of remorse. Vietnamese culture prefers non-verbal communication while American culture is more inclined to use verbal expression.

Conclusion

Those who made it to the states find that the practices and customs are different from those in their homeland. In fact, some American values and customs might contradict and threaten their sense of being as an individual and a group. Some Vietnamese people are quicker to assimilate to the American culture, while others may experience culture shock and never quite recover. Regardless of what stage of assimilation they may be experiencing, most of these people arrive in the states as any immigrant group, to begin a better life. Although some of their old practices contradict the dominant American values and customs, or even violate the laws, most of it is done because of lack of understanding of the new system.

End Notes

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